



Santa Fe Opera

A World Premiere, a Rarity, & *Lucia*

Brenda Rae in the role of Lucia.

James A Van Sant has been ARG's Santa Fe Correspondent for decades and has been an opera aficionado for even longer. Gil French, on the other hand, is an orchestra aficionado who has come to opera gradually and believes that the most important musician at any performance is the conductor. Each offers his own response to the same three 2017 Santa Fe Opera productions. Note that they attended different performances and sat in different places. —Ed.

James A Van Sant

Santa Fe Opera has always been known as one of the most 'visual' opera companies in the business. Last summer's season abundantly demonstrated that; several of the shows by general consent were much enhanced, even saved, by visual appeal.

Rimsky-Korsakoff: *The Golden Cockerel*

The Golden Cockerel (Le Coq d'Or) is based on a poem of Alexander Pushkin and is probably the most famous opera you have never seen. It is rarely performed, yet everyone seems to have heard of it, and some of its music is familiar from concerts and ballets. I have seen only two productions over the many years I have attended opera everywhere, and I think I know why. More on that anon.

Santa Fe's show was handsomely mounted, the stage dominated by a huge curved screen which had projected images relating to the narration and plot, such as it is. The golden cockerel itself was never seen except as a projected image in many poses and forms. The bird was an oracular force in the opera, as was an Astrologer who both opened and closed the show with his commentary and prognostications. Whenever the fictional bird sang, as it

did in the pungent high soprano of Kasia Borowiec, it was suddenly fluttering about or posing in vivid golden images across the screen. Not much other furnishing was needed except for a huge throne for the central figure, King Dodon. The able baritone Tom Mix played his foolish tsar role with skill, making theatrical shtick of his difficulties climbing on and around his giant throne—a small tsar with a huge throne, get it? He's not a big enough man for his job.

The story of the Golden Cockerel is dated and uninteresting: the rise and fall of a Russian king portrayed as a slap-stick comic character who can make an audience laugh but probably not care much about his life or eventual demise (he is pecked to death by the cockerel). Dodon is seduced by the vampish Queen of Shemakha, played out in full vaudeville style but brilliantly sung by Venera Gimadieva, a richly talented Russian coloratura soprano who sang her role with strength and pure tone, a commanding high register, and apt physical action, including revealing her trim and shapely figure in a nearly complete striptease.

The Tsar's two sons were young baritones Richard Smagur and Jorge Espino, effective in rather thankless roles, with contralto Meredith Arwady and bass Kevin Burdette in other brief but important parts. Choral director Susanne Sheston made magic with the superb opera apprentices who formed her highly proficient chorus.



Venera Gimadieva (The Queen of She-makha) and Tim Mix (King Dodon)

And now the costumes: for many they were central to the show. Beautifully designed, and made entirely in the Santa Fe Opera shops by one of the crack teams in the costume business, they formed a constant stream of color, shape, and stimulus in an opera that often needed energy and point. Santa Fe Opera artisans found the original fabric designs in a Russian book of costume illustrations and had them enhanced and manufactured into the fabrics and scenic touches that finally graced the show. Great credit for scenic and costume design goes to Gary McCann, projection design by Driscoll Otto, lighting by Paul Hackenmueller, and overall direction by the noted Paul Curran.

Emmanuel Villaume had the Opera Orchestra sounding better than ever. This realization of Rimsky's opera was original with Santa Fe but is a co-production with the Dallas Opera, where it will next be seen.

Why is this opera so rarely played? It is a gaudy bore. In spite of the best efforts of Santa Fe Opera—and they were thoughtful and lavish—nothing could overcome the absence of action or worthwhile plot. In this opera all action is reported, little or nothing demonstrated or played out before your eyes. Characterization is minimal. Why would you care about these people? Yes, Rimsky's orchestration is lovely and memorable; it's a fine orchestral score, and credit Santa Fe that it was sung in the original Russian. As far as I am concerned, reported action is the millstone around the neck of many an opera—far too often used to frame a show and dragging it down in the process.

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Donizetti: *Lucia di Lammermoor*

"Not another Lucia, you say! Well, yes, another Lucia, then another and another. There will always be another Lucia, for it is among the greatest and most rewarding of bel canto operas; and it is a jewel of rare value when well sung and set, as, for the most part, was Santa Fe's recent original production. The success of this opera turns on the ability of its title character, without a doubt one of the finest coloratura roles ever written. American born and trained (but German based) soprano Brenda Rae covered herself with glory. Hers is surely one of the brightest opera careers for the years ahead.

This *Lucia*, handsomely designed by Ricardo Hernandez of Havana, Cuba, was a unit set consisting of a stage-wide grouping of large panels, movable and pleasingly colored in mild tones in a basic design scheme of trapezoidal abstractions. Lighting could change the colors, and the set had the positive effect of seeming to project the performers forward toward the audience.

The musical values of Santa Fe's Donizetti were first rate. The orchestra, largely rebuilt and repopulated by Edo de Waart in the years after founder John Crosby was gone, has done nothing but grow in quality and accomplishment since that time. It sounded refined and lovely under the direction of Corrado Rovaris, music director of Opera Philadelphia, who is a regular at Santa Fe. In the sextet I have rarely heard the transparency Rovaris achieved or the consideration he gave to singers, which allowed a welcome sense of hearing each of the singers individually and together. What a treat! So it was from start to finish: in the first act fountain scene, later in Lucia's remarkable duet with her brother Enrico Ashton, then in the sextet, then in the evening's climax, Lucia's mad scene. Here Rae was mistress of every note, so secure in her role (which she has sung often in major German houses) that she could add nuance and creative touches that made the grand old music fresh and energetic. Her ability to pluck high notes—high D or E-flat—seemingly out of thin air brought gasps from the audience. She sang with a relaxed technique that allowed the voice to remain fresh all evening and supported stylistic touches such as attacking a very high note quite softly, then feeding it in a slow crescendo to full volume. This was grand virtu-

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osic singing of the old school—rare in our time. The Santa Fe audience of 2200 in a sold-out house rose to its feet and cheered the young American (who is in her mid-30s), as if they were in the presence of a Luisa Tetrazzini or Lillian Nordica; one day we may recall we were once “in the presence” ourselves.

This brings up a point that has long bothered me, which is making Lucia wait for her solo bows for one more scene with Edgardo the tenor so that the singers can all come on together. Perhaps managers fear that after a good Mad Scene, if there is a pause, some of the audience might leave, not bothering with the tenor. In the case at hand, such would have been no small blessing, for the young tenor from Guatemala, Mario Chang, proved to be way over his head in Edgardo’s demanding music. He was almost out of voice by the end of his long tomb scene. I feel every sympathy for the young artist but have to wonder why Santa Fe Opera was casting him against world-class artists such as Brenda Rae and the splendid baritone Zachary Nelson, who sang as Lucia’s brother, Enrico, and was a worthy partner in the duet scene. Chang’s voice was produced with noticeable tension, the tone often tight and strained; as a result he tired quickly. Not ready for prime time.

Christian Van Horn (bass) was a fine Raimondo, and apprentice Sara Coit was entirely up to her role as Alisa. Ron Daniels was stage director; costumes were by Emily Rebholz, and lighting by Christopher Ackerland.

Somebody had the tacky idea of having Lucia, at the end of the final scene, when Edgardo was falling apart, return from the dead to comfort him—as it turned out, just in time for him to bury his head in her lap as his voice was collapsing.



Garrett Sorenson (Woz) and Edward Parks (Steve Jobs)

American Record Guide

Mason Bates: *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (world premiere)

There was one thing for certain about the new opera about Apple founder Steve Jobs that all hands, audiences and critics alike, could agree on: brevity is the soul of virtue. The Mason Bates-Mark Campbell show was only 90 minutes long in its world premiere run at Santa Fe, and the stage was so scenically innovative and busy that the evening seemed to fly by. This proved to be a major asset.

The opera, played in 18 short scenes in no seeming order, was pleasing to some, a good deal less so to many others. There was a certain sense among people leaving the opera house that it was good to have seen the opera one time—now we don’t need to see it again. The controversial, never well-liked Jobs was portrayed as the blunt, somewhat cruel, thoughtless man he apparently was, in music and words that did little to idolize or glorify him for his earth-shaking digital and electronic inventions and accomplishments. The “evolution” to which the title refers is centered not on electronics but the humanization and mellowing of Jobs that resulted from his long-suffering wife Laurene’s many years of devotion and effort. As a character, Laurene is considerably more appealing than her one-dimensional husband. The strong sub-text of the show is Jobs’s rise, fall, and rise again, ironically to die young, though only after coming to terms with his flawed humanity.

Santa Fe Opera’s setting of the show was brilliant. The stage was an ever-moving display of flat screens and backdrops that were ingeniously tinted and illuminated, most often from invisible sources, in almost continuous movement marking changing scenes and moods. Costuming was unremarkable present day Silicon valley-style, and the characters, except for the title role, were well cast.

The Jobs role was taken by baritone Edward Parks, here a bit non-charismatic visually and stylistically and only adequate vocally. The strongest player and singer by far was Sasha Cooke as Laurene, with Wei Wu as Jobs’s Zen master, and capable tenor Garrett Sorenson as Jobs’s friend and mainstay colleague, Steve Wozniak. Susanne Sheston’s marvelous chorus of young apprentices brought welcome tonal anchoring to the

massed sounds Bates's music sometimes required. Kevin Newbury created the smart, swift stage direction; and Victoria Tzykum deserves credit for set design. Michael Christie crisply conducted the orchestra, which included synthesized sound from electronic sources, heightening, I suppose, one's awareness of the electronic nature of the evening's subject. It mattered little.

I have saved a few words about Bates's music to the end, as it was basically a puzzle. The music proved to be modestly pleasing to the ear, though always a bit dry and rarely melodic or memorable. It seemed mainly to be sound effects, and sometimes this was good enough as comment on stage action without entering it or much augmenting it. Of course, it must be hard to write strong or memorable music when your central figure is by no means a hero or even flawed in a sympathetic way. I doubt this score will lend itself very well to orchestral arrangements or excerpting.

Several performances were recorded, and a CD set of the opera is expected next year. One major difficulty is that all singing voices were amplified, some quite inexpertly and unattractively, which could have been some of baritone Parks's problem. Perhaps the recording will reveal more natural sound.



Edward Parks (Steve Jobs)

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Gil French

Mason Bates: *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* (world premiere)

Someone deserves a gold medal and large raise for the public relations blitz that preceded the world premiere of *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* at the Santa Fe Opera, where a seventh performance had to be added to the six that sold out before the June 22 opening night. Was the reason an audience that trusts the tastes of management or just terrific PR?

The best thing about Mason Bates's first opera was unquestionably the visuals by stage director Kevin Newbury, scenic designer Victor "Vita" Tzykun, and 59 Production's projection designs. Other than the natural backdrop of the open sky and valley toward Los Alamos through the wings and center of the stage, the props were six simple white cubes about 14 feet tall, 5 feet wide, and 3 feet thick that could be rolled around into any configuration. The work opens and closes with the small garage workshop with a table, tools, and balloons that Jobs's father turned over to his 10-year-old son. The rest of the visuals from outdoor scenes to an office or classroom were done mostly by inventive projections (headlines, sales reports, a forest, and especially circuit boards). The projections were especially effective as transitions, since all the scenes (except for one 12-minute scene) were 1 to 3 minutes long. Despite the fact that the 100-minute one-act work had 18 scenes and jumped back and forth in non-linear fashion across Jobs's life from youth to death, the opera's structure was remarkably seamless.

Mark Campbell's libretto was almost as remarkable. English was not used in the usual operatic style where syllables are stretched to fit the music. Conductor Michael Christie said it was as if the measured notes were taken away and just the pitches were indicated so that the performers could create a naturally rhythmic speech. "As if," Christie said; the notes are in the score, but the result was that the text came across as naturally as if spoken by a local TV anchor or Congressman Paul Ryan talking about running a Wisconsin farm. The result, as mezzo Sasha Cooke (Jobs's wife) put it, was "a new kind of sung vernacular that shapes a new avenue for opera to go down."

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The libretto's fresh clever wit was the perfect parallel to Jobs's inventiveness that, in the single swoop of inventing the iPhone, drew together in one simple instrument the many parts of our daily computer life from the telephone to every method of digital communication. In the other scenes the words were so absorbing and entertaining that I often failed to pay attention to the singing and acting—a testament to the cast's naturalness. Of special note were baritone Edward Parks as Jobs (who never leaves the stage); marvelous bass Wei Wu as his warm, understated, slyly witty Zen spiritual advisor; tenor Garrett Sorenson as Jobs's original partner Steve Wozniak (who had the closest thing to an aria); and mezzo Sasha Cooke as Jobs's wife Laurene. The chorus (reporters, students, co-workers, and wedding and memorial service guests), swept up into the liquid flow, was superb.

The only problem with the libretto is that when it deals with the relationship between Jobs and his wife or his death (in a memorial scene) the text becomes so smarmy and clichéd that it sounds like pulp fiction or sentimental slop. I said, "Have a couple drinks before the finale, and you'll weep a river of tears." The text's cleverness and wit is so missing in those scenes that the script seems to have been written by a different librettist. Or is it, rather, the music itself that makes the texts seem so sophomoric?

And that leaves the orchestra and the simple-minded minimalistic music that sounds like poor man's John Adams. The score itself looks amazingly vertical, linear, and uncomplicated. Its lack of invention is in complete contrast to every other aspect of the production. I bet this was the easiest world premiere Michael Christie, music director of the adventurous Minnesota Opera, ever had to conduct. Easiest or not, Christie's superb pacing and continuity were the spine of the production's success.

The subtle electronics, pre-programmed sounds inspired by digital devices, were seamlessly blended with the singers and orchestra. They were run by Mason Bates himself as he sat directly in front of Christie, facing him. Not just the electronics but all the music—guitar, singers, and orchestra—were amplified. (How can the score list the guitar as acoustic if it's amplified?) True, this was the most balanced, refined, inoffensive amplification I've ever heard; but, from row DD (30) a few rows from

the back under a double balcony, I felt like I was watching a movie. The sound was fine, the sight lines clear, but the speakers depersonalized the artists on stage and in the pit.

The current rage seems to be: create a new work by a young composer about a popular figure, using projections, amplification, and minimalist techniques, and publicists and some critics will say, "It's the wave of the future for opera." I think *The (R)evolution of Steve Jobs* deserves a solid run on Broadway. I mean that seriously, not sarcastically, for an opera *Jobs* is not—not any more than were Leonard Bernstein's several attempts at opera, the art form he so longed to succeed in but didn't. But you can judge that for yourself at the next performances of *Jobs* at the Indiana University School of Music (September 2018), Seattle Opera (2018-19 season), and San Francisco Opera (2019-20 season).



Rimsky-Korsakoff:
The Golden Cockerel

Just as new to Santa Fe Opera was the premiere of its stunning production of *The Golden Cockerel* (1904) by Rimsky-Korsakoff (a co-production with the Dallas Opera, date not yet scheduled). This Russian fairy tale is a satire on the scatter-brained, sex-starved Russian tsar with a negative self-image who indulged in foolish wars early in the 20th Century.

What remains with me most, as with *Jobs*, are the visual aspects of the production. Out of the stage floor emerged a gigantic red throne with an extremely wide seat (enough to seat four or five) that was at least 10 feet off the floor. It made King Dodon (a real dodo) and others, who literally had to climb up it, look like miniature buffoons. The sumptuous costumes for his two stupid rival sons, arrogant but ignorant, and fawning courtesans were based on drawings or paintings of celebratory peasant garb from the 19th Century. The

libretto needed no tweaking whatsoever; it yielded up its unmistakable parallels to events in the White House (as of mid-July) and had the audience guffawing from the opening to the final act where the Queen of Shemakha first strip-teased, then clothed herself in a dress whose fashion seemed inspired more by the decor at Mar-a-Lago and Trump Tower than by the elegant tastes of the president's wife. (The production was designed before the 2016 primary elections.)

A large curved metallic structure that expanded on stage right was used for the production's ingenious projections. Among them was the radiant golden cockerel whose crowing one moment signaled "enemies on the horizon", the next moment "the coast is clear" to the paranoid tsar. Even more imaginative was the projection of clever symbolic interpretations of his dreams. The superb chorus literally bent over backwards as they fawned before the conflicting orders of their master. In brief, the staging was brilliant.

Eric Owens was originally cast for the basso profundo role of King Dodon but bowed out after a few rehearsals. Tim Mix, who replaced him, was a master of comedy, especially when he shed his royal robes and paraded his obeseness in red long johns. It was a pity that his fine expressive voice was not powerful enough. As the Queen (who doesn't appear until Act II, which she dominates) Russian soprano Venera Gimadieva had a small Slavic voice with flat intonation, small close-to-the-body gestures, and weak stage presence. By Act III her singing and acting improved. American tenor Richard Smagur and Mexican baritone Jorge Espino (both SFO apprentice singers) gave strong voice and comedic presence as Dodon's two know-it-all sons. They appeared only in Act I because Act II opens with them atop a heap of dead soldiers, having stabbed one another in their mutual passion for the queen. American bass Kevin Burdette had just the imperious voice and personality as the skinny general, whose head eventually was chopped off and paraded John the Baptist style, eliciting fake horror from the courtiers. Outstanding in the supporting cast was Meredith Arawady, who stole the show as Amelfa, the mere "waitress" of the court but its wisest consigliere. American soprano Kasia Borowiec was ideal as she sang the cockerel's high-pitched crowing off-stage.

The fundamental foundation of this opera

is the orchestra. It offers not only the harmonic and atmospheric substratum from start to finish, but Rimsky often writes like Mahler with the orchestra not merely imitative or harmonically supportive of the vocal lines but providing its own independent music that blends perfectly with the singers.

Because of the paucity of modern recordings, the music was new to the 32 Music Critics Association colleagues I was with in Santa Fe for its annual meeting. (Only a four-movement orchestral suite from the opera is sometimes heard. Ormandy's recording is very fine, Dorati's even better.) I mention this because, after the opera, one critic understood the sarcastic, comic nature of the grim fairy tale but couldn't make it fit with the happy, colorful orchestral music. I said that was because she was sitting in row AA in the back (where I was stuck for Act I) where the orchestra sounded like a distant radio, and because there wasn't any quality coming from the pit. The oversized muscular gestures of conductor Emanuel Villaume, whom I observed in Acts II and III from the front row, elicited barely a nuance from the orchestra. With his head buried in the score, he flipped entrance gestures to the cast but barely looked at the orchestra. Phrases weren't tailored, rhythms lacked articulation and uplift, and the somewhat slow tempos were void of feeling. Yes, there were abundant rehearsals, and, in the past, I've heard exciting performances from Villaume (music director of the Dallas Opera). But here he was dead on arrival, completely void of style and giving the impression of a first rehearsal where a conductor's sole goal is keeping everyone on the beat. What an awful thing to do to this spectacular production.

Donizetti:

Lucia di Lammermoor

What a difference a conductor makes in opera! Corrado Rovaris, music director of the newly revitalized Opera Philadelphia, conducting the same orchestra, made me realize for the first time how effective an orchestrator Gaetano Donizetti was. For example, as long transparent passages of mere triplets underlining a duet arose from the pit, they magnified the conflicting emotions between the characters. Even more vital was Rovaris's pacing as well as the breathing space he gave to the long lyrical

lines. He gave powerful shape to the opera's almost constant poignancy without any tear-jerking gimmicks.

The unquestioned star of the cast was American soprano Brenda Rae as Lucia. Her supremely musical, pitch-perfect lyrical voice and stage presence conveyed an amazing range of expression as the woman who betrothed herself to Edgardo, her brother's arch-enemy. In her duets and ensemble scenes she was totally one with her partners. As Alisa, Lucia's earnest companion, American Sarah Coit's mezzo voice and acting were the perfect contrast to Rae's. American baritone Zachary Nelson was outstanding as Lucia's unrelentingly desperate brother Enrico, forcing her into a marriage for money. Guate-

malan Mario Chang as Edgardo had a constricted, cutting tenor voice that seemed almost void of expression with its almost constant *forte* volume; I feared that the opera's final glorious aria would be a disaster with him, but the sheer earnestness of his acting made the scene achingly poignant, except in the repeat (a duet with the chaplain Bidebent) where the hopelessly statuesque American bass-baritone Christian Van Horn upstaged him with his usual bellowing as he stood-and-delivered downstage.

Period costumes by Emily Rebholz were fine. The staging by Ron Daniels was awful: far too much stand-and-deliver, the chorus herded in either bad Broadway face-the-audience lines or in classic poses of three and four (the Loacoön group came to mind). The set by Riccardo Hernandez was just as bad: bare walls left and right that could be turned inward upstage, used for projections of a forest scene or non-descript designs for the inside walls of the castle (the cheap modern way of creating stage sets, comparable to the cardboard cutouts used in the 18th Century). Most puzzling was the confrontation duet, as a bed was pushed on stage with Lucia's hunky shirtless brother in it as he proceeded to rub his sister's

shoulders, which she found repulsive—why the incestuous implication?

Also, the blood on Lucia's wedding gown looked like a Sherwin Williams accident. Ignore that. The mad scene was spectacular, with an utterly deranged Rae repeatedly descending and ascending the staircase, while a superbly projected glass harmonica (30 flute-like tubes arranged like a xylophone plus 8 large water-wine glasses) matched her waxing and waning lines in exact parallel, or as echoes, or at one point in breathtaking parallel sixths ascending to the top of her range. The effect was psychotic.

Yes, Santa Fe's *Lucia* was a mixed production. Some objected to the changed ending:



Lord Arturo Bucklaw (Carlos Santelli) and Enrico Ashton (Zachary Nelson)

instead of Edgardo stabbing himself to join Lucia in heaven, he joined her on stage as Enrico slew him with a sword and Lucia's ghost arose out of a small pond that green lighting made look like it was covered with slime. My

response to the changed ending was, "So what!" When all was said and done, I was so deeply moved that I said in wonder to the person next to me, "How did they do that!"

Indeed, how does Santa Fe draw such mixed large crowds of every age? There were some empty seats on the far sides at the Wednesday night *Cockarel*. At the Friday night *Lucia* lots of kids took advantage of the first of seven "family nights" with tickets just \$15 for youths aged 6 to 22 and \$30 each for the first two adults. The other operas this season were Johann Strauss's *Fledermaus* and Handel's *Alcina*. No premieres for the 2018 season June 29 to August 25, when the repertoire will be Adams's *Doctor Atomic*, Bernstein's *Candide*, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, Rossini's *Italian Girl in Algiers*, and Richard Strauss's *Ariadne auf Naxos*.

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